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ABSTRACT

A hands-on strategy for children to use in determining how sentences and paragraphs work is based on the easily understood notion of topic placement in sentences, with reference to the less easily definable terms of coherence and cohesion. Children can learn that the topic is expected at the beginning of the sentence (followed by a comment) and can apply this rule as a strategy for determining meaning in individual sentences. A 1985 study that compared sample paragraphs from four different groups of writers revealed certain similarities, such as the average word length of the paragraphs; the total number of sentences in the paragraphs; the proportion of cohesive ties to the total number of words; and within this proportion of ties, the abundance of lexical ties to the total number of words and the absence of conjunctive ties. These trends may suggest that basic relationships between sentences are acquired early in life. (RS)

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ACCESSING THE PARAGRAPH:
A STRATEGY FOR TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ AND TO WRITE

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Children learning to read and write need a hands-on strategy for determining how sentences and paragraphs work. While this strategy as taught may include reference to coherence and cohesion, these concepts are sometimes difficult to define in practical terms to a young audience. But children can understand and apply easily the related notion of topic placement in sentences. As adults we expect the topic to appear toward the beginning of the sentence (followed by a comment), and they can learn this, too, subsequently applying it as a strategy for determining meaning in individual sentences and between sentences (theirs and others').

ACCESSING THE PARAGRAPH:
A STRATEGY FOR TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ AND TO WRITE

As teachers we make sense of texts we read and write, even if they are not as sensible as they might be, because we have a flexible, innate sense of meaning and order. For today's children, however, this innate ability competes with other kinds of abilities: successfully manipulating time and space as in TV videos; mastering high-tech wizardry; connecting with those of other cultures (Chambers, 1985). To unweave the complex abilities of children, to help them to think, and to read and write single strands of coherent and cohesive information become for us a necessary, albeit crucial task.

Below are the specifics of the strategy for identifying and maintaining coherence and cohesion in the paragraph, the core of both reading and writing. But first, a useful vocabulary.

THE VOCABULARY

Coherence is logical relationships between sentences in a self-contained unit of written text, that is, what we see typically as a typographical paragraph (Kaplan, 1972). A real world paragraph, reproduced below, visualizes logi-

cal relationships between sentences, in this case subordinate (S) sentences. The subject of the paragraph, written for a young audience, concerns the source of the word helium.

Perhaps the most important trace of Helios in modern English is the result of the eclipse of the sun that took place in India in 1868.

S The light of the sun's growing atmosphere was allowed to pass through an instrument called a spectroscope.

S In doing so, the light was split up into a series of bright lines of different colors.

S Each line was the mark of a particular element in the sun's atmosphere and could be duplicated in the light of elements on earth when these were heated to a white-hot glow.

S There was one exception.

S One line in the sun's light was not like the line produced by any element on the earth.

These sentences "level" in a linear fashion, rather like a narrative, with each sentence explaining in more detail the one above. Another set of sentences may explain, for example, the stages of a rocket used to put a satellite into orbit; this set would have the vertical look of coordinate elements rather than the linear look of ones like those in the helium paragraph. And, of course, still another set may be a combination of both. Whatever

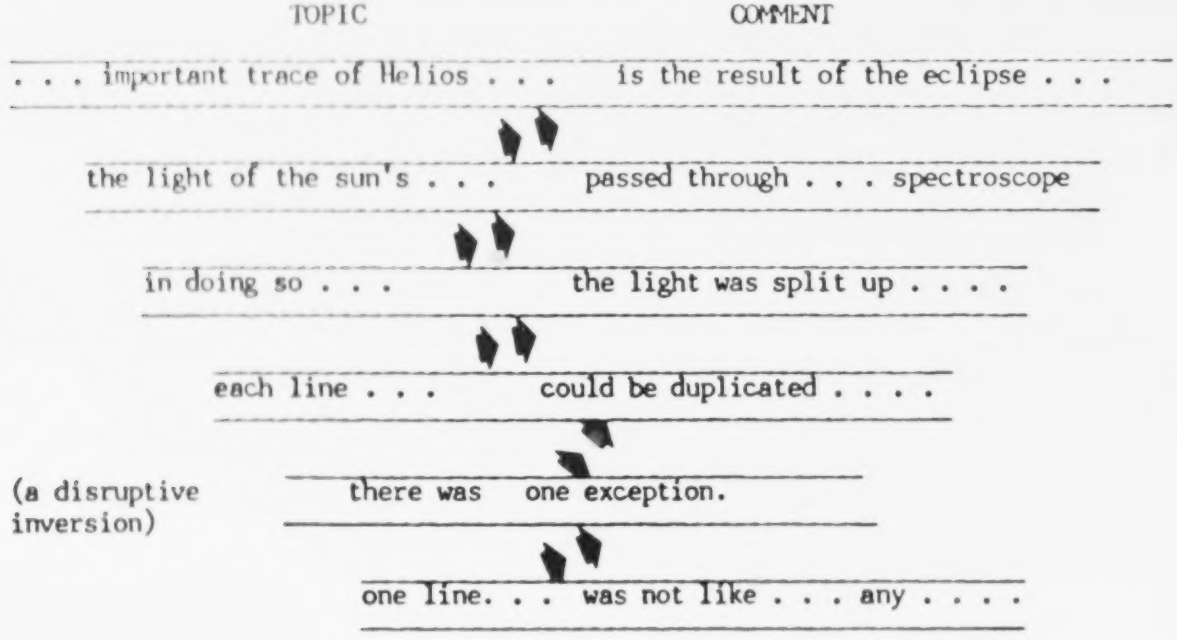
the kinds of relationships, the sentences in the paragraph cohere, and we can see this visually.

Cohesion, this term adapted from the research of Halliday and Hasan (1976), refers to single-word or word-phrase tieups between (not within) sentences. These tie-ups may be: lexical (vocabulary items); grammatical (explicit referents); conjunctive (explicit connectives). Lexical ties from the above paragraph on helium, only the most obvious, connect to SUN in sentence one: sun's; light; line; exception; line. Examples of grammatical ties are the (in sentence two) ⬡ SUN; so ⬡ pass . . . through . . . a spectroscope; each ⬡ lines; one ⬡ line; one ⬡ exception. No conjunctive ties are present. These "internal" words or phrases help to ensure cohesiveness; they repeat information to reinforce the subject.

Coherence and cohesion as defined above are useful and necessary concepts for us. But they may not seem tangible enough to allow children to predict (or create) meaning for themselves. This notion of predictability, a very tangible concept, has been examined by Halliday (1985) and others (see Williams, 1981). Halliday, whether using the terms thematic structure or information structure to discuss the sentence, notes the expected position of the topic at its beginning. Conversely, the end of the sentence contains the focus or the comment about the

topic. Topic, comment: the first is expected at the beginning of the sentence, the latter at the end. In a text of several sentences, whether the topic is repeated with a new comment or whether the topic clarifies the previous comment, if the semantic structure (Halliday's term) is not predictable enough of the time, meaning will blur.

Below is a visual representation of the paragraph on helium, which indicates the linkages of topic/comment and the emerging pattern of topic development.


TOPIC
COMMENT
. . . important trace of Helios . . .
is the result of the eclipse . . .
the light of the sun's . . .
passed through . . . spectroscope
in doing so . . .
the light was split up . . . .
each line . . .
could be duplicated . . . .
(a disruptive inversion)
there was
one exception.
one line. . .
was not like . . . any . . . .

This component, and coherence and cohesion, all visually presented, have helped to define a paragraph (see also Weissberg, 1984).

Thus a paragraph is a group of sentences which may develop in a linear fashion or a vertical fashion (as this one will) or both. It may have a topic sentence (as in the helium paragraph), or it may have a first sentence whose "new" information is not generalized and which is subordinate to an "invisible" topic sentence (like this paragraph). A competent paragraph, like a competent sentence, has an easy coherence, with many sets of cohesive ties; it picks up old information or a recognizable topic and then generates new information or explains the old more closely. A competent paragraph does not make too many or too few assumptions regarding its readership; it does not repeat excessively unless for an apparent purpose; it does not trivialize, thus straying too far from the topic. A competent paragraph seems implicitly to be logical and reasonable and self-contained, despite different readership.

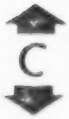
THE STRATEGY AND ITS USEFULNESS

Below are two paragraphs. The first was written by a fourth-grade native speaker of English, of average ability and achievement, who responded to directions asking for information about any invention, both useful and enjoyable. The paragraph contains a topic sentence, followed by a

series of sentences coordinate (C) to each other and subordinate to the topic sentence.

One day I decided to find something out about the computer.

- I found out that with a computer you could make charts, graphs, and other things useful to mankind.
  - It helps people work on cars to make them run better. The computer also helps make machines and things like that work better to make life easier and more enjoyable.



- A computer also has games to play with little men running all over the place.
- Computers just make life easier and more enjoyable.
- People could find out more about computers, and it is fun to learn about them, too.
- Computers have changed the life of many people because they help to find things out, to learn and to have fun learning.

The second paragraph, by an adult writer, was selected randomly from a book about language. It patterns much like the child's.

Different languages have different numbers of basic color terms, and there is a pattern in the colors that are not named.

- Anthropologists have found that all languages have at least two basic color terms.
  - If a language has only two color terms, they will divide the colors into what we might call light-warm (white, yellow, red) and dark-cool (black, blue, green).

- If a language has three basic color terms, they will refer to black, white, and red.
  - That is to say, if people who speak the language are shown a large color chart and asked to point to the best instances of colors to which these three terms refer, they will point to colors that are very close to what English speakers would choose as the best instances of black, white, and red.

- Languages that have four basic color terms will also have a term for either yellow or green, but not both.
- If a language has five, it will have terms for both yellow and green.
- If it has six basic color terms, it will have a term for everyone of the psychological primaries.
- If we assume that basic terms are never dropped from the vocabulary of a language, there would appear to be a fixed sequence of evolutionary stages through which all languages pass as their basic vocabulary increases.

Both paragraphs level fairly quickly for superficial coherence. Both can be scanned quickly for cohesive ties. But they lose quality when we start to locate topic/comment patterns and to look closely at the kinds of comment or new information offered.

The child's paragraph, presumably enumerative, proposed to list "found-out" information about a computer. The found-out information included its ability to "make charts, graphs, and other things." Things included working

on cars, making machines, playing games. The found-out information also included the computer's ability to make life easier and more enjoyable, to learn, and to have fun learning. Each of the three abilities was repeated twice in the paragraph. All of the found-out information came at the ends of sentences (its proper place), but for a nine-sentence paragraph which named only five specific details without elaboration, and three vague phrases, the enumeration did not lead to enough new information.

The adult's paragraph, also enumerative, also repeated excessively but to greater advantage. It also treated a concept, in this case the developing numbers of named colors in existing languages and, therefore, an implied regularity between unnamed languages of the past. This paragraph, though for a specialized audience, was nevertheless self-contained and understandable. It left room, through repetition of the term basic color term, for readers to process information and to pause as the writer revealed the development of basic color terms from two terms to the maximum of six "psychological primaries." While the first paragraph listed simply the computer's abilities to make charts and things, here the lists of new information were carried further, for example, two color terms existing in a language as invariably "light-warm (white, yellow, red) and dark-cool (black, blue, green)."

Yet the adult's paragraph was not as precise as it could have been. For example, the opening sentence could have read: Anthropologists have found that different languages have different numbers of basic color terms. Then the clausal pattern of language/number of terms could have continued as a topical unit with more detailed information following it. This paragraph, like the child's, exhibits other problems. Even so, it, like the other, has become accessible for a fairly refined analysis. Much of this can also be accessible to children.

Inevitably, then, why do we (and the children) benefit from applying this analytic strategy, especially that of topic placement? I hope the above demonstration, in part, shows why. I also hope the following summary tells why.

1. This strategy can explain what's good, how to repair what's bad.

2. It can direct all of us to look at first sentences, the first parts of sentences, the ends of sentences.

3. It can help us note the importance of specific details, which ones to repeat, which ones not to repeat.

4. It can help us to simplify.

5. It can help us to find meaning.

A cautionary note--this strategy is pragmatic, ad hoc, so to speak. We as teachers must not make it te-

dious or stifling for ourselves or for the children, only using it when necessary, keeping it simple, hoping it becomes implicit knowledge. As such, it has helped me to help my students, native and nonnative speakers alike, discuss quite specifically how sentences work to form our most common unit of written expression, the paragraph. As an aside, research on topic structure analysis, a similar strategy, is developing rapidly among those interested in improving the writing proficiency of nonnative speakers of English (Connor, 1987).

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

A study was done that compared sample paragraphs from four kinds of writers: fourth graders; sixth graders; adults who write for children; adult writers *per se* (Rankin, 1985). Results of analysis indicated several similarities between the four groups: the average word length of the paragraphs; the total number of sentences in the paragraphs; the proportion of cohesive ties to the total number of words (25%), and within this proportion of ties the abundance of lexical ties (65%) and the absence of conjunctive ties (5%). These trends may suggest some priorities for what *not* to emphasize when we teach communicative writing. These trends may also suggest that basic relationships between sentences are acquired early in life (Halliday, 1975). And that writing competency involves not only adequate control of discrete functions

like lexical repetition and broad functions like sentence relationships, it also involves a complex interrelationship of coherence and cohesion and topic placement on a "field," the text.

Language takes many forms outside the literacy concepts we are used to: cybernetics, artificial intelligence, everyday personal conversation, baby talk. Yet ordinary language, the kind we read, the kind we write, transcends all other "languages." Without it nothing else happens. Strategies for teaching children to read and write effectively have needed a fresh approach. Maybe this one will prove helpful.

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